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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHENGDU 000148

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STATE FOR EAP/CM AND DRL

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TAGS: PGOV SCUL PHUM KPAO CH

SUBJECT: SICHUAN RESEARCHER CLAIMS "GREAT IMPROVEMENT" IN CHINA'S MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

REF: BEIJING 3831

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CLASSIFIED BY: James Boughner, Consul General, United States Consulate, Chengdu.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Ruan Zhixiao (strictly protect), a researcher in the Media Research Institution of the Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences (SASS) said there has been "great improvement" in China's media environment, including the coverage of sensitive topics, but that there are still limits. He commented that the government still does not consider the Internet "traditional media," and that he has been able to maintain an uncensored personal website with a community forum on politics and society. According to Ruan, newspaper editors have the first responsibility for content, and government representatives have secondary responsibility, with an extra review by Foreign Affairs officials for any article related to bilateral or multilateral relations. Reporting of "false news" is not a new phenomenon, but in contrast to the past when it was reported to serve government interests, it is now reported because of market competition. Soon after the Sixth Plenum, President Hu Jintao spoke to media executives to remind them of their role in a Harmonious Society, including not magnifying the importance of small events. In Sichuan, as in other parts of our Consular district, government controls on print media and the Internet appear to be changing on an almost daily basis. End Summary.

"Great Improvement" in Chinese Media Environment

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¶2. (C) Ruan stated that since "reform and opening," there has been "great improvement" in China's media environment -- including with sensitive topics -- but with limits. This limited nature comes from the structure, in that the media is part of the government. Ruan explained that Party media theory sets out the unwritten rule that national media can criticize local government, but not the national government. Local media is limited by provincial leaders -- it can criticize levels below, but not provincial cadres.

¶3. (C) One Washington visitor asked if Ruan agreed with some Chinese journalists in Shanghai who said the period from 2000-2004 was generally a time of greater freedom for the press, and 2004-2007, a period of greater restriction. Ruan agreed that since 2004, there have been more controls over the Internet in particular, and that the government has enacted several laws and regulations in that area. He continued, however, that this is not truly a control over debate, but only an imposition of

regulations. There are some topics that have exceeded the government's ability to control. For example, after the News Media and Publication Ministry banned eight books last year, many people protested on the Internet. This shows there is much greater freedom than before, Ruan opined.

Internet Not Considered "Traditional Media"

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¶ 14. (C) Continuing on the subject of the Internet, Ruan commented that the government still does not consider the Internet "traditional media," and for that reason, there are fewer limitations, seemingly contradicting his earlier statement that greater controls have been imposed since 2004. He said he maintains a personal website (Chuanboxue.net) containing a community forum with discussions on politics and society. It has not been censored, and there are "free debates." In some posts, some individuals argue for democratic socialism, and some against it. The boundary around such debates has been greatly expanded by the Internet. In his forum, there are "multiple critiques and a lot of freedom," Ruan said. It is still possible to read critiques of current and past leaders on the Internet.

¶ 15. (C) Note and Comment: Following the government's May 29 announcement of an increase in the tax on stock trades, Internet stock chat rooms (gu ba) were full of angry comments criticizing the decision, including a posting stating that "hoodlum government officials and foreign investors will benefit most" from imposition of this tax. Neither the tax itself nor the amount were apparently in issue, but rather the fact that authorities were perceived to have "lied once again" after explicitly promising not to raise the tax a few weeks ago. The blogs and chat rooms were full of sarcasm and complaints from approximately May 30 through June 5, when all comments were blocked and/or erased. Local contacts commented that it was depressing to see the government purge discussion on even these "economic" sites, and that life in Chengdu was becoming "progressively more and more boring" in a "stifling information

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environment." End Note and Comment.

Media Represents PRC Government Views

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¶ 16. (C) One Washington visitor raised the case of a recent People's Daily (Renmin Ribao) article criticizing United States policy in Iraq, and said many people in the U.S. Government assumed it represented the PRC Government's views because it appeared in the Party-controlled press. Ruan responded that editors have the first responsibility for content, and government representatives have secondary responsibility. He added that for any article that affects bilateral or multilateral relations, Foreign Affairs officials will also review the article. (Note: In a recent media censorship case in Chengdu, three newspaper officials were fired after the Chengdu Evening News inadvertently ran an ad dedicated to the "adamant mothers of the June 4 victims." (Reftel) End Note).

¶ 17. (C) The visitors asked if subscriptions to newspapers have declined as more and more people get their news from the Internet. Ruan replied that the newspaper industry in China is still rising because people's thirst for information is ever-increasing, as is the scope of news coverage. However, he asserted the print media has changed from being the Party's mouthpiece to being a market-controlled newspaper. Huaxi ("West China") is the best example of this. The reform of the media began with the newspaper. Now there are "citizens' newspapers," which pay more attention to the needs of the common people. Television is also devoting more coverage to people's livelihood issues.

"False News" in the Media

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¶8. (C) Turning to the subject of "false news" accompanying the "marketization" of the media, Ruan said he has been covering this since the 1980s. He noted that false reporting is not a new phenomenon -- it occurred even during Mao Zedong's time. There is more false information reported now because of market competition. In the past, false news served the interests of the government. Now, it serves the interests of the media themselves. For example, prior to China's May Labor Day Holiday, many stories were written to "promote" the May Day atmosphere -- stories covering the activities of workers, cadres, and farmers. Ruan cited a specific example of a journalist with a tight deadline who decided it was easier to make up a story than to actually go out and interview people. His editor knew he had not interviewed people, but ran the story anyway, hoping to gain attention, promotion and higher wages.

¶9. (C) Theoretically, in a diverse society, the media will also be diverse, Ruan continued. There are two aspects to the media's role: a propaganda mission and a market mission. Hu Jintao has warned that government officials should not only serve the rich. Ruan pointed out that in spite of this admonition, mainstream media continue to target the interests of the high-income groups, or those making more than RMB 3,000 (USD 3,600) a month. Ruan added it was also unfortunate that in some rural areas, media speaks only for government leaders and ignores issues and interests of the vast majority of common citizens.

#### Role of Media in Harmonious Society

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¶10. (C) Chinese press reported that Hu Jintao spoke to media executives just after the Sixth Plenum, reminding them of their role in building a Harmonious Society. Ruan attributed this reminder in part to the case of Yang Lijuan, where the media stirred up controversy over a relatively insignificant issue. Media attention to the issue became "unhealthy" and led to "wasted" discussion of an issue that should not have grabbed headlines. (Note: Yang Lijuan is a 29-year-old "professional fan" of pop star Liu Dehua. She dreamed of meeting Liu for 13 years. Her father and family tried to support her efforts to meet the star by selling their home and other belongings. After a March 2007 "fan party" in Hong Kong during which Liu did not receive the much sought-after attention from Liu, her father committed suicide. The press and Internet created a nationwide stir about the case which in turn spawned discussion, debate and commentary. End Note). Ruan agreed with the admonition to the media to be careful not to magnify the significance of the small events, but rather to promote harmonious aspects of society and a "peaceful environment." As an aside, Ruan noted there is a new news segment on the evening news called "Ping-an Chengdu" (Peaceful Chengdu), but ironically, coverage in the segment is not very peaceful and includes murders, accidents, and disputes.

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#### Comment

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¶11. In Sichuan, as in other parts of our Consular district, government controls on print media and the Internet appear to be changing on an almost daily basis. On June 8, the Chengdu Government announced a new campaign to inspect and license Internet cafes. Post will continue to monitor the local media in order to try to identify trends in censorship and enforcement of new regulations.  
BOUGHNER